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Bush given high marks for 'outstanding' speech

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WASHINGTON -- President George W. Bush strode through thunderous applause at the Capitol on Thursday night to the podium where great leaders of the past have rallied the nation in times of crisis -- and then he left his own mark on that hallowed spot.

Standing before the solemn and stern faces of America's federal government, his seasoned vice president missing from the traditional backdrop because of fears of another terrorist attack, Bush was on his own in a place that tests presidents.

Members of Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike, said he passed that test.

"He provided an extraordinarily inspirational battle plan for the American people," said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif. "It was one of the best speeches I've ever heard."

Bush sought to strike a balance between projecting calm confidence and steely resolve. He set that tone from the beginning.

"My fellow citizens, for the last nine days, the entire world has seen for itself the state of our union -- and it is strong," Bush said as the gathered members of Congress, the Cabinet and Supreme Court interrupted one of 29 times with applause.

"Tonight, we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief turned to anger, and anger to resolution," he continued. "Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done."

In command

To Rep. Ellen Tauscher, D-Walnut Creek, and most other members of Congress, it was a powerful message meant to assure and focus the country.

"I think he was a commander in chief who was in command, and I was impressed," Tauscher said.

It is the most solemn of settings for a presidential speech -- a rare joint session of Congress called not to deliver the annual State of the Union address but to address a union in a state of shock.

Bush went to Capitol Hill on Thursday night to explain to the nation how America will respond to last week's

terrorist attacks on the Washington and New York on a day when the estimated death toll rose to a staggering 6,500 people.

Franklin Roosevelt made the same trip on the day after Pearl Harbor, as did Lyndon Johnson in the mournful aftermath of John Kennedy's assassination and Bush's own father after Iraq invaded Kuwait.

Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Palo Alto, said she thought back to some of those famous speeches as she watched Bush on Thursday night.

"I thought the president was outstanding," she said. "If anyone had a question about whether the nation had rallied, there never would be a question tonight."

The atmosphere in the stately chamber of the House of Representatives reflected the gravity of the crisis. Security was intense -- concrete barriers were put in place to prevent car bombs, helicopters flew low and Air Force jets high in a patrol for hijacked aircraft.

There were few smiles among the members of Congress, decked out in red, white and blue ties or scarves or lapel ribbons.

"I think there were no Democrats and Republicans in the chamber . . . we were all Americans," Tauscher said. "We were all united."

Gone was the celebratory pomp of a State of the Union address, where celebrities like Whoopi Goldberg and Sammy Sosa would sit in the audience.

On Thursday, the celebrities were the heroes that have emerged from the terrorist attacks -- people like New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Lisa Beamer, whose husband, Todd, was among the passengers on Flight 93 who apparently fought the hijackers and sent the plane crashing into an isolated Pennsylvania field instead of a crowded American landmark.

Bush mixed his 34-minute speech with tough and touching talk. For Afghanistan's Taliban, he had non-negotiable ultimatums. For the victims, he had prayers. For Americans unfamiliar with international terrorism, he had lessons -- and words of caution as they seek a target for their anger.

"We are in a fight for our principles and our first responsibility is to live by them. No one should be singled out for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith."

Honda approves

The inclusion of that message was important to Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, who was sent to a Japanese-American internment camp as a child during the hysteria following the attack on Pearl Harbor.

"It was the word of the commander in chief telling people this is not acceptable," Honda said of attacks on Muslims and Arab Americans.

Bush is not known as a great orator. He has joked about his tendency to mispronounce words. He refers to himself as "plain-spoken," and on Thursday night his words often were plain, but chosen carefully and spoken clearly.

"It was a plain-spoken, but an eloquent message nonetheless," said Rep. Christopher Cox, R-Newport Beach.

"Nobody could misunderstand either our purpose or the end result."

As Bush finished his address to more thunderous applause, he moved forward in a dramatically different phase of a presidency begun exactly eight months earlier with lingering questions and controversy after last fall's contentious election.

``I think this moment tonight is going to help define what kind of president he can be," Honda said. ``If there's any doubt about his leadership ability, some of that doubt is fading."

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